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Carpenders Park and South Oxhey: a Tale of Two Estates, Part 1

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Tags

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I'm pleased to feature the first of two guest posts by Dr Jill Stewart. Jill has worked in housing for over 30 years. She has written previously for Municipal Dreams about the earliest environmental health practitioners **before 1914** and **after the First World War**. This is my review of one of Jill's books, **Environmental Health and Housing: Issues for Public Health**. You can follow Jill on Twitter **@Jill_L_Stewart** and see more of her work on her personal website, **Housing, Health, Creativity**.

This post is perhaps unusual for Municipal Dreams in that it first touches on an interwar private estate, Carpenders Park, before looking at South Oxhey, a post-Second World War council estate built by the London County Council (LCC, later Greater London Council, GLC). But there is a reason for this! After the war, Carpenders Park, then under the jurisdiction of Watford Rural District Council, built a few streets of council housing. Around the same time, the LCC set about building thousands of homes in a new estate to be called South Oxhey. Both were near Watford in Hertfordshire. The housing on the two estates was divided not just by different councils but also by the railway line running between. Initially South Oxhey only consisted of houses, but as it was developed into the 1950s and more community facilities were provided, the two estates became increasingly interdependent for shopping, services, social, educational and cultural

needs. In 1974 both estates were transferred into the then new Three Rivers District Council, amalgamating them further.

By the 1930s, the developer Mr Absolum had been looking for land to develop near to London and the Carpenders Park area was exactly what he had been seeking. The area was hemmed in on all sides by roads and the railway but had formed a parcel of land ripe for development. He started to develop a suburban estate of houses and bungalows, built for rising numbers of car-owning owner-occupiers. The 1930s sales brochures promised peaceful surrounds with healthy, fresh air and green spaces, very much in the spirit of a garden suburb. The new estate took its name from the mansion house, later to become a private school, and the station was called Carpenders Park, on the Euston to Watford line.

It was of course around this time that the social documentary *Housing Problems* (1935) was filmed.⁽¹⁾ It is hard to reconcile some of the conditions seen in this film with developments like Carpenders Park seeming almost of another world. The documentary demonstrated the poor conditions so many were enduring but also new council and other socially committed housing schemes to replace these, including flats at [Quarry Hill](#), Leeds, and Kensal House in west London, showcasing new building techniques with an air of optimism and hope of what the future would hold. All of this was, of course, interrupted by the outbreak of war in 1939. Building was brought to a standstill as the country faced other priorities and as the war progressed thousands of London households were bombed out. Both building materials and the builders to erect new homes became scarce. But as the war dragged on, with more and more Londoners losing their homes, LCC plans were already afoot for new council housing developments in a progressive post-war era.

This and next week's post will explore some of this. This first post looks at South Oxhey as a new post-war housing estate and Carpenders Park as a private estate with a few streets of council housing and also their schools. It looks at challenges faced by South Oxhey's new relocated residents, who enjoyed better housing but initially lacked wider amenities, although these were gradually provided. Next week's post develops this further and explores the ongoing development of the estate and how it improved for the new residents as shops, schools, community venues and health services were provided in South Oxhey, also enhancing provision for those living 'over the other side' in Carpenders Park.

South Oxhey: a new post-war estate

During the war, the 1943 [County of London Plan](#) was already in place for a new post-war era of a better world to come for all. Drawing from the 1944 Dudley Report on the

Design of Dwellings, there was a focus on housing and health, combining thoughtful planning with good housing quality and space standards, in a similar vein to the Tudor Walters Report just after the First World War. The report looked ahead to addressing poor housing conditions, new expectations and meeting modern housing needs. London's housing stock had suffered terribly during the war and had inevitably fallen behind its planned slum clearance and redevelopment programmes. The *County of London Plan* written by Sir Patrick Abercrombie and JH Forshaw, proposed to reduce London's population and the overall LCC programme of 'out of county' estates, part of the programme (alongside New Towns) to ease congestion in London – thirteen new estates in a ring around the capital beyond the interwar cottage suburbs. By 1965, 45,000 homes had been built in these estates, 39 per cent of the LCC's total post-war newbuild. LCC plans were afoot in 1943 to compulsorily purchase land that had become available and then owned by the Blackwell family (of Crosse and Blackwell) at Oxhey Place Estate. Like Carpenders Park, it then still had a mansion house (which burnt down in the 1960s) but also a chapel built by Sir James Altham and dating from 1612 that still remains. It was not far from London geographically but a million miles away (metaphorically) in so many other ways. The proposal was to develop a cottage estate to house some 15,000 people in nearly 4000 new homes, primarily to help replenish London's housing stock lost during the war. (See, for example, sources 2, 3 and 4) The Minister of Health confirmed the Compulsory Purchase Order in 1944 for 921 acres for a new cottage estate, excluding Oxhey Chapel and preserving some of the woodland. (5)



Oxhey Chapel

Some were far from happy about this. There was a petition from Bushey residents in 1943 (6) but protests over the satellite town were also matched by some support for the proposed well-designed estate (7). On April 21, 1944 it was reported that: 'The whole of the future of Watford and its status as a separate town is lying in the balance as the result of the two-day's Inquiry held at the beginning of this week in the Council Chamber at Watford Town Hall, to decide whether the Minister of Health shall confirm the compulsory purchase order made by the London County Council, enabling them to acquire Oxhey Place Estate, including the beautiful Oxhey Woods, as a site for a housing scheme for 15,000 to 20,000 London workers'. (8)

The Times published letters in November 1944 (displayed in Oxhey Library's 2013 exhibition about the estate and cited in source 2) from local residents challenging the LCC's plans to build on such an attractive area on the periphery of London of 'another great dormitory consisting of houses largely of one character, housing people of mainly one income level' and another expressed disappointment that this satellite town would have three serious defects: the time wasted travelling to work; the loss of good agricultural land; the 'philistine preference for utilitarian to aesthetic values', adding that the new residents would be 'exiles'.

Against this rather tense backdrop, the scene was set for South Oxhey to be planned and built as a quality development for its new community. The new estate represented everything the then Labour government stood for. Planners drew from the garden city

and suburbs movement and sought to create a mixed community where all lived together in harmony. Aneurin Bevan was Minister of Health and Housing from 1945 to 1951, the time that construction of South Oxhey really took off. He had a strong commitment to good housing as a cornerstone of the Welfare State, overseeing a million houses built. But the vision was not just about housing and the environment, Bevan also called for all citizens to share and lead a full life '... in the living tapestry of a mixed community'. (9)

Some of the initial objections about South Oxhey were around the concentration of working-class residents in this new setting and some of the 1950s research (see next post) referred to the 'working-class' community's health. Many of the new homes were for families and a range of design and sizes created variation in housing stock and occupiers, emphasising the importance of a balanced community as far as was possible with the other pressing priorities and challenges of housing provision in this post-war era.



www.britainfromabove.org.uk/image/EAW022129

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The South Oxhey Housing Estate under construction, South Oxhey, 1949 (EAW022129)
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The first tenants, Mr and Mrs Caldwell, from Paddington, were presented with their house keys by Rt. Hon. Lady Nathan, chair of the LCC and moved into Hayling Road in November 1947. An article referred to these houses as four-roomed cottages, with modern a kitchen large enough to dine in. In Hayling Road, the houses had 3 bedrooms with separate living room and there were also smaller houses elsewhere. Houses benefitted from both living and storage space. Kitchen fittings and cupboards were provided with ample places for prams, fuel storage for the main living room fire and for tools. Hot water also provided some heating via bedroom ducts, and there were additional points for electric heaters. Ample windows would provide light and a cheerful feeling (10).

Building had only started in 1947 but by 1950 some 15,000 people had been housed (11) and many recall that building was still not finished. (12) One resident who moved in in March 1949 shared their letter from the LCC Director of Housing and Valuer (13), welcoming them but explaining there were still some challenges to be faced, as the priority continued to be house building. The letter highlighted the lack of local facilities and gave advice about the new estate, quiet enjoyment and being neighbourly. It asked residents to look after the general environment and their gardens and gave advice on how to occupy their new homes economically:

There may possibly be a number of things in your home that will be quite new to you. You may need advice as to the most economical use of your electric or gas cooker or the type of fire – you may find that you are unaccustomed to the use of an immersion heater. Inside your home, it is wise to ascertain where the water stop-cock is located in case of any emergency as well as the taps etc., for turning off the gas and electricity supply.

On some of the new housing estates, you will at first find inconveniences. No shops, churches, chapels, community halls etc., but these will all come in time. When these have been provided on estates, I am sure you will want to make the best possible use of them and so give all the help you can to the establishment of a new and useful community. You will, I am sure, take care of your new home. Such small things as oiling window and door hinges, and re-washing taps when necessary will not only assist with calls on maintenance, but will help to keep your home in good order, for it is not possible, at the present time, to give immediate attention to repairs, when a request is received. This, I think you will understand, especially when I remind you that we are devoting all our energies to the production of new homes.

The ongoing need for more housing led to new legislation. The 1949 Housing Act enabled local authorities to provide housing of different types and sizes and for mixed income groups. There was, as before, an emphasis on affordability of both construction and amenity and scope for some experimentation in design. In some areas, like South Oxhey, there was an emphasis on planning and housing layout, with kitchen and bathrooms and even a separate WC for larger families as well as storage space. South Oxhey's original housing – now mostly substantially renovated, with one or two streets

demolished and replaced – represented a snapshot in time of council housing and flats of the 1940s and 1950s. The range of housing types built included traditional brick, rendered but also more experimental permanent [prefabs](#) including Cornish houses, [Stent houses](#) (14) and BISF (or 'tin houses'). (15).



BISF houses



A Cornish house, photographed 2017



Cornish house under renovation, photographed 2022 (see also Post 2 next week)

There were later two newer blocks of flats, Silkin and Corbett Houses, but these have since been demolished. Both blocks had 24 dwellings in eight storeys and were commissioned by Watford Rural District Council in 1960 and completed in 1963. (16)



Corbett House and Silkin House photographed in 1988 © Tower Block UK and made available through a Creative Commons licence

Meanwhile back in Carpenders Park ...

Meanwhile, back in Carpenders Park after the war, then under the jurisdiction of Watford Rural District Council, the essentially owner-occupied estate was to host three new roads of council houses in the 1950s on its London side; Romilly Drive, Oulton Way and Little Oxhey Lane (see photographs 6 and 7). Little Oxhey Lane itself runs right across the railway bridge and further down this road, it becomes South Oxhey. It has not been possible to find much information on these streets in Carpenders Park.



Romilly Drive



Little Oxhey Lane

It was also around this time, and certainly worth a municipal mention, that Hertfordshire County Council School Architects were designing and building some really good school buildings. St Meryl Junior Mixed Infant School – named after Mr Absolum’s daughter,

Meryl – featured in an exhibition at RIBA in 2019, showcasing the Bauhaus influence.
(15)

The several schools in South Oxhey shared many of these well considered building designs displayed at St Meryl. The estate's primary schools included Colnbrook, Greenfields, Little Furze, Oxhey Wood, St Josephs, Warren Dell and Woodhall (see photo 8). At one point the estate had two secondary schools, Clarendon, on Chilwell Gardens, and the smaller Hampden School. They were later amalgamated into Sir James Altham School, which is now itself long gone, and the land was sold for private housing where the school once stood, now called James Altham Way.



South Oxhey's primary schools (1997 artwork)

We end this week's post here having overviewed some of the housing types and initial issues facing the new residents and return with Part 2 next week. Then, we will explore some of the problems faced by the new residents with the new location, the lack of facilities initially and their gradual provision. We will also take a quick look at some literature and art and some of the early health studies about South Oxhey, helping us gain a greater understanding of both estates as well as some of the new challenges presented.

References

- (1) The film can be viewed on [YouTube](#).
- (2) Reidy, D. (ed.) (2013), *Poor but Proud: A History of South Oxhey*, David Reidy in collaboration with Three Rivers Museum Trust (Stephen Austin and Sons Ltd, Hertford)
- (3) Trainor, T. (2012), *Slums of London to South Oxhey* (Lulu.com)
- (4) McNamara-Wright, R. (1994), *South Oxhey: A Giant on Their Doorstep* (Shalefield, Brentwood)
- (5) 'LCC to Build at Oxhey', *West Herts Post*, October 1944, cited in Nunn, J. B. (1987) *The Book of Watford: A Portrait of our Town, c1800-1987*, (Pageprint, Watford) Ltd. p.226
- (6) 'Oxhey "Plan" – Opposition', *West Herts Post*, November 1943, cited in Nunn, J. B. (1987) *The Book of Watford*, p.222
- (7) Satellite town protest letter from E. H. Large, November 1943, cited in Nunn, J. B. (1987) *The Book of Watford*, p.222
- (8) '[Fight to Retain Oxhey Place as Beauty Spot](#)', *Watford Observer*, 21 April 1944
- (9) [Housing Bill, House of Commons Debate, 16 March 1949, vol 462 cc2121-231](#)
- (10) 'Oxhey Place Town is Born', *West Herts Post*, November 1947, cited in Nunn, J. B. (1987), *The Book of Watford*, p. 241
- (11) Nunn, J. B. (1999), *Watford Past: A Pictorial History in Colour* (J. B. Nunn, Watford)
- (12) 'South Oxhey – moving in day', cited in Nunn, J. B. (1987) *The Book of Watford*, p.248
- (13) Our Oxhey, '[Moving onto the LCC Estate, 31st March 1949](#)'
- (14) Our Oxhey, '[Stent House on Corner of Woodhall Lane 1948 and 2013](#)'
- (15) For more information, see [The Non-Standard House Forum](#) website
- (16) Our Oxhey, '[Silkin and Corbett House](#)' and Tower Block UK, the University of Edinburgh, '[Oxhey Place. S. Oxhey](#)'
- (17) For a description of the exhibition, see [Beyond Bauhaus exhibition unveiled at RIBA](#) and for illustration, see [Beyond Bauhaus – Chapter Three Modern Education](#). Please note that the school at [Carpenders Park](#) is recorded in the latter source but incorrectly referred to as being in Oxhey. For fuller information on the Hertfordshire schools programme at this time, see Saint, A. (1990) *Not Buildings but a Method of Building: The Achievement of the Post-War Hertfordshire School Building Programme* (Hertfordshire Publications, Hertford)

Other sources

For more photographs of Carpenders Park, South Oxhey and the London Loop see [Council Housing on the London Loop, Part II, Section 14: Moor Park to Hatch End](#)

Stewart, J (2016) [Housing and Hope](#)

Stewart, J (2018) [Two Estates, Two Novels](#)

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[Hertfordshire Archive and Library Service](#)

[Three Rivers Museum of Local History](#)

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1. Pingback: [Carpencers Park and South Oxhey: a Tale of Two Estates, Part 2 | Municipal Dreams](#)